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### Singing Skew: Review of Ailbhe Darcy's Imaginary Menagerie

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## Blog Review 4: Miriam Gamble Reviews Ailbhe Darcy's 'Imaginary Menagerie'

Written by Miriam Gamble at November 17, 2011 7:11

In one of many gems in this extraordinary first collection, Ailbhe Darcy compares her emotional (and, implicitly, artistic) self to “a solitary magpie”:

reflecting every colour and none,  
playing I-Spy with the gleams of a mind

‘Caw Poem’ contains everything we might justifiably look for in the début work of a poet of promise. Darcy’s ear is pitch-perfect, as displayed in her deft imitation of the magpie’s movements:

I cocked my head,  
hopped a little, hopped a little closer,  
love become a scrum, a scuffle,  
a ruffle of feathers

The opening is arresting, and cuts straight to the chase:

Not atriums and ventricles that cup and pour

Finally, imagistic and linguistic innovation is at a premium, both effortless and bang on the money:

a solitary magpie  
beats cricked wings

“Cricked” is the mark of her ability as a wordsmith. Yet the poem offers much, much more, and it’s this that sets Darcy apart from the ranks of capable word-turners and puts her in that special place reserved for the very few – for poets who matter, have something to say that’s worth the hearing. You can’t matter as a poet if you don’t have style, but neither can you if it’s all you’re equipped with. Darcy’s poems have style and substance; indeed, in her work, they are one and the same.

‘Caw Poem’ enacts a kind of bricolage which recurs throughout the collection and recalls both MacNeice’s plea for “an impure poetry” and Muldoon’s baffled and baffling sense of random interconnection and segue. Early in his career (and, one suspects, with more than the tip of his tongue in his cheek), Muldoon said something to the tune that he’d love to be able to write simple poems, pure poems, ‘lovely little lyrics’, but couldn’t do it. ‘Caw Poem’ closes with the conditional urge to “plunder some bright thing, / learn to sing true”, but Darcy, like Muldoon, is astute enough to recognise that “truth” doesn’t come in pebbles of quartz, and that conviction is frequently culpable. Many of her poems are (in a good way) about poetry, the working through and questioning of her own aesthetic – ‘Terminus’, for example, which both yearns for and dismisses the knack of “lay[ing] it on the table”, or ‘Socks’, which toys hilariously with Terry Eagleton’s pronouncement on “the inherent unfinishedness and unpredictability of language...[which is] in a broad sense political”:

I wear my socks odd, queer  
bags a couple of feet from my  
  
knees...  
  
...I believe  
that’s right – the way you can’t tell  
what colour my knickers will be.

The fun of this shouldn’t, however, (and doesn’t) obscure the underlying seriousness of poems which themselves invest in the concept of the “unfinished” and the “political” in language, but are justifiably sceptical as to its force. At the heart of Darcy’s writing is a desperate desire for poetry to measure up, have real value in a world of “parataxis” and “bodies degraded / in mixed media” (‘La rue est rentrée dans la chambre’); for it to function as a means by which, if not to make sense of such a world, at least to challenge it. One of the most likeable and convincing things about her, though, is her irrepressible tendency to self-question, revert to “doubting / [her]

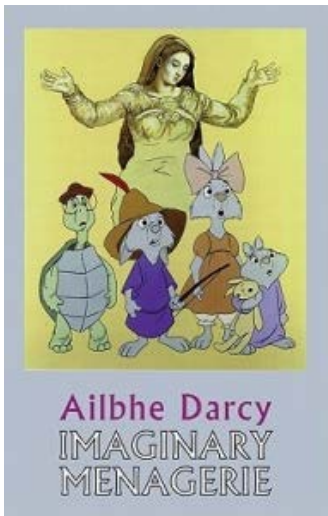
own innocence" ('Terminus') at every turn.

While 'Stump' gives a fair indication of what Darcy isn't about – the organically whole poem that finishes with a resounding, self-satisfied "Whump" – 'Panopticon' and 'Umheimlich' explore the inevitable and ultimately necessary "anaesthetic" role of "an aesthetic". Both are addressed to suicides – those who couldn't or wouldn't indulge in the lie of systems, "do the awful maths" – and who chose silence rather than the "the noise" which "circles us" "at the centre of a shrinking globe". So vigilant is Darcy her vigilance extends to this painful understanding that the very means by which she hopes to rock the boat is the means by which 'world' is coped with – systematised – and thus made liveable to her. 'Panopticon', incidentally, performs a characteristically brilliant inversion on Bentham's original application of the term – in Darcy's hands it's the watcher who's imprisoned, not the watched. And from this dinning mélange are culled the poems.

The title of **Imaginary Menagerie** bespeaks diversity, the mixed bag of the first book in which the neophyte tries his or her hand at this and that without yet knowing where to go or why. In this sense it is impishly misleading, for Darcy has, as Kevin Higgins remarks, a clear sense of "purpose" and the book is utterly coherent. On the other hand, diversity's the turf these poems tread, from metamorphoses to poly-linguistic stews. There are, in any case, few better collections to carry with you "at the eye of the panopticon". The mix is daring, and never off the mark.

### Miriam Gamble

*Miriam Gamble's first collection is 'The Squirrels Are Dead' (Bloodaxe 2010), which won a Somerset Maugham Award.*



**Imaginary Menagerie** by Ailbhe Darcy is published by Bloodaxe, 2011, £8.95

for blog review 3, see **Steven Waling on Rupert Loydell's 'Wildlife'**.

for blog review 2, see **Cath Nichols on Gregory Woods's 'An Ordinary Dog'**.

for blog review 1, see **Mark Burnhope on Katy Evans-Bush's 'Egg Printing Explained'**.

Tags: **Ailbhe Darcy, bloodaxe, Irish poetry, Miriam Gamble, Reviews**

## One Response to "Blog Review 4: Miriam Gamble Reviews Ailbhe Darcy's 'Imaginary Menagerie'"

I.



Murray Alfredson says:

**November 17, 2011 at 11:38 am**

This review pricked my interest for an incidental reason. The birds we call magpies in my country have a very sweet break-voiced song, a song that all Australians feel nostalgic for. But it is well to stay away when they are nesting, unless one finds enjoyment in a bloodied scalp. I have even seen a pair of them chase off a wedge-tailed eagle by the same method, diving at her from above and below. The eagle with huge wings adapted to slow soaring could only ride higher and higher on a thermal (I saw this from an altitude somewhat above 2000 metres).

Unlike in the UK, our birds sing the whole year through, and where I live one can hear the magpies mating calls at midnight already in mid-winter (July).

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